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# Social Networks as Inauthentic Sociality

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*ABSTRACT.* This article argues that social networks constitute an inauthentic form of sociality. The two component concepts of this claim, inauthenticity and sociality, are explored in order to avoid some widespread misinterpretations. Inauthenticity is examined on the basis of the relevant sections in Heidegger's *Being and Time*, first with respect to its main characteristics, then in terms of what motivates it and its benefits, and finally with respect to its status as a non-normative concept. The second part of the paper explores sociality. Here, a main emphasis is the way in which my body imposes constraints on my social relations in the here and now, which virtuality appears to overcome. Yet such an escape from corporeality is not ultimately possible. The third and final part takes the analysis to the wider level of world, that is, our current historical world which has given rise to such an understanding of sociality.

When celebrities comment on the dangers of social networks, they often appear old-fashioned, or paranoid, or both. For example, German singer Udo Jürgens lamented the fact that what makes its way on to the Internet also stays there, somewhere, still retrievable.<sup>1</sup> It is worrisome that anybody can write anything – truth or lies – about anybody else, which opens up the possibility of a kind of universal virtual “mobbing” that actress Uschi Glas has described as a «public stoning [*öffentliche Steinigung*]».<sup>2</sup> These possibilities are created by a lack of censorship as well as by the severe difficulties involved in attributing responsibility for what has been said (since those who create the posts can take on virtual identities). Of course, this same lack of censorship also has effects on the quality of writing.

The issue of appearing old-fashioned is important for framing the discussion in the right way. It is by no means the purpose of the current article to

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<sup>1</sup> Süddeutsche Zeitung, March 23, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> DIE ZEIT, February 23, 2014.

recommend abstinence from the Internet or from contemporary information technologies. The advantages of these technologies for everyday life, research, and information in the widest sense are enormous. In general, it is not the purpose of the current article to provide any recommendations about what should or should not be done, in line with the non-normative concept of inauthenticity as explained below.

Yet this article puts forward the claim that social networks are an inauthentic form of sociality. This claim will be unfolded in such a way as to avoid simplistic conclusions and implications. The first part of the article explains the main thesis by examining social networks in light of Heidegger's considerations on inauthenticity. This part has three subsections, which move from the main characteristics of inauthenticity to the underlying motivations or advantages of inauthenticity, before proposing that inauthenticity should, in line with what Heidegger himself insists, be read as a non-normative concept. The second part tackles the topic of sociality by first focussing on corporeality, from which virtual reality appears to free us, and then discusses how such an escape is illusory. The third and final section explores the theme in relation to our contemporary world in order to show that inauthenticity should not be understood in terms of what an individual does or does not do, but rather in terms of how it reflects the understanding of sociality that determines our historical world.

## 1. Inauthenticity

In this section, I will explain why social networks qualify as an inauthentic form of sociality. This will be done by first following and applying Heidegger's analysis of inauthenticity in *Being and Time* before expanding on the topic more generally.

First, a brief note on terminology and translation. Translators and scholars largely agree on "authenticity" and "inauthenticity" as the terms for translating Heidegger's "*Eigentlichkeit*" and "*Uneigentlichkeit*". This translation indeed strikes me as appropriate both in general and for the purposes of this article. It is often noted that the German "*eigentlich*" has the connotations of true, actual and genuine. These meanings are indeed relevant for our reflections. Yet it might seem particularly unsurprising that social networks would present a case of inauthentic sociality in the sense of "not actual" or "not genuine" sociality, since they are obviously *virtual*. However, virtuality is not what is usually meant by inauthenticity, and in relation to the claim put

forward here, it is important to note that while the virtuality of social networks is undisputed, it is usually assumed that despite this virtuality, social networks are real or genuine as far as their sociality is concerned. In other words, it is assumed that genuine sociality between virtual parties is at stake.

The claim put forward here is instead that the sociality of social networks is not genuine; it is inauthentic in Heidegger's sense. In order to understand Heidegger's concept of inauthenticity, it is crucial to note that despite the privative prefix "in-" Heidegger is here describing our normal, general, most everyday way of being. There is something not quite genuine in how we always already are, because we behave how everybody behaves without asking whether there are good reasons for acting in these ways and without investigating whether our comportment is in line with or conducive to what we actually want. Yet, as Heidegger also affirms, we have "valid" – that is, existentially plausible – reasons for this kind of evasive behaviour. These reasons are connected to our finitude, the groundlessness of our existence, the absence of universal principles and the corresponding difficulties in coming to grips with existential questions concerning the relevance and meaning of our actions. We will return to the motivations behind inauthenticity below. For now, we are concerned with its main characteristics.

### 1.1 Main Characteristics

The first characteristic of inauthenticity as discussed in *Being and Time* is distanciality (*Abständigkeit*).<sup>3</sup> As we operate in the world like everybody else does, we are concerned to not fall back behind others. Our existence in this mode is determined by the fact that we compare ourselves with others, making sure that we do not compare badly. This characteristic is brought to a simple yet powerful level in social networks, since our social relations here are quantified. The number of "friends", "followers", "likes", "clicks", and "hits" are given explicitly. Moreover, these numbers are themselves made public, and as a result, others can also see how I compare, thus making it virtually impossible not to care. Luckily, there are ways to improve our "score" in this respect; but this only confirms the inauthentic character of measuring sociality in this fashion.<sup>4</sup>

The next defining characteristic of inauthenticity is a delivering of my

<sup>3</sup> See HEIDEGGER 2010, *Being and Time* [abbreviated BT throughout this essay], p. 126.

<sup>4</sup> One of the most convenient ways for PhD students to make money from home without any special computer skills is by manipulating in certain ways the numbers of clicks and connections that impact on search engines and similar tools.

existence to the others that Heidegger calls «subservience [*Botmäßigkeit*]».<sup>5</sup> Heidegger explains how the others to whom I hand over my existence are not definite others, but a kind of neutral or anonymous multiplicity of others. This captures the character of social networks quite well, since the frame in which members encounter each other is pre-set in an anonymous fashion. Even for those networks in which my profile is only visible to my “friends”, I cannot be sure which of these friends might spread information about myself – and there is also the possibility that profiles may have been corrupted. Furthermore, we know by now that the secret services of countries such as the United States and Britain have access in principle to everything that is presented and exchanged on the Internet, and this would hold for some other countries as well, though perhaps not as fully and universally. But since “everybody” is doing it, and “they” do not seem to be concerned, why would *I* be? In this way, I have delivered my existence – especially my virtual one – to the “they”; but luckily I do not need to worry about this because nobody else is worried.

Heidegger points to the «dictatorship» of the “they”,<sup>6</sup> but he also discusses how inauthenticity unburdens us. It is the unburdening character of inauthenticity that makes it powerful and thus consolidates its dictatorship. The dictatorship comes about because the character of the “they” is so neutral that nobody takes responsibility and there is thus nobody to whom one can turn for questions or complaints. The result bears some resemblance to certain scenarios from Kafka’s writings. The power of the “they” crucially depends on its pervasiveness: everybody, at least in his or her everyday existence, is a part of it. To be sure, the same does not hold for social networks: not everybody is a member. But those who are not members do not have access to certain pieces of information. Companies, businesses and institutions nowadays have Facebook pages, and while it certainly remains possible to simply admit to not having such access – thus appearing old-fashioned – it is much more difficult to give a brief<sup>7</sup> explanation for not wanting to become a member. In this way, social networks “level down” (*einebnen*) exceptions and ensure that most everyone, or at least the “average” person, is a member.<sup>8</sup>

### 1.2 Benefits of Inauthenticity

When it comes to the assets or advantages conferred by inauthenticity, different levels need to be considered, from the more superficial to the deeper. In order

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<sup>5</sup> BT, p. 126.

<sup>6</sup> BT, p. 126.

<sup>7</sup> Shorter than writing an essay, that is.

<sup>8</sup> See BT, p. 127.

to explain the role of the “they”, Heidegger points out that we enjoy, read, see and judge the way they do.<sup>9</sup> We let them decide for us what appears worth reading and seeing, and what provides pleasure and enjoyment. On the Internet, we are constantly alerted to the most viewed YouTube clips, the most read articles, the numbers of hits and clicks, and we are told that others who like what we do *also* like this and that. Undoubtedly, this can be helpful in a number of ways and can alert me to options and alternatives I would not have noticed otherwise. But from the time of Socrates and Plato we have known that majority agreement does not guarantee truth or even quality. Furthermore, these are self-perpetuating mechanisms as well as being mechanisms that are open to manipulation.

Our desire to explore what others have seen and read is not just based on the sense that it might save us time or alert us to options we would not have noticed otherwise. This desire is based on the urge to stay “up to date”, which in turn is grounded in a craving for newness and sensation.<sup>10</sup> On the level of “normal” sociality, this craving manifests itself in questions like “what’s up?” and “what’s new?” and in the hunger for gossip. Our hunger for newness and sensation is based on what Heidegger treats under the heading of curiosity (*Neugier*). Our everyday existence is determined by curiosity. Curiosity, as Heidegger explains, expresses the desire simply to perceive, in contrast to what goes on in our practical life, especially in the world of work. When we rest – and resting, of course, is already in itself desirable – our circumspection is no longer caught up in the work-world, but is free. Free for what? We are free to see without any specific purpose, meaning that «Dasein lets itself be intrigued by just the outward appearance of the world».<sup>11</sup> Curiosity sees for the sake of seeing, not out of genuine interest in what it sees. As a result, there is no need to stay with what is seen; curiosity swiftly moves on, thriving on the possibility of distraction (*Zerstreuung*).<sup>12</sup>

Curiosity is far removed from philosophy. «Curiosity has nothing to do with the contemplation that wonders at being, *thaumazein*, it has no interest in wondering to the point of not understanding».<sup>13</sup> Curiosity collects all sorts of curious facts; it does not pause to contemplate the bigger ontological picture, which can evoke wonder at the realisation that there is something rather than nothing, and that we can neither fully understand this something nor

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9 See BT, pp. 126-7.

10 Psychologists have named the corresponding condition “Fear of Missing out (FoMo)”. See PRZYBYLSKI ET AL. 2013.

11 BT, p. 172.

12 See BT, p. 129.

13 BT, p. 172.

comprehend how it comes about. Wonder brings about philosophy whereas curiosity only gives rise to more curiosity. Furthermore, curiosity is «everywhere and nowhere», it «uproots»<sup>14</sup> Dasein – and it thus thrives on the uprootedness or non-location of virtual space.

Yet to fully understand the attraction of inauthenticity, we need to move to an even deeper level and ask what makes distraction, newness, and the deliverance of responsibility so appealing. In other words, what is it that we are running away from when we flee into inauthenticity? According to Heidegger, we are fleeing from the nothing that always threatens the “there is (something)”. More precisely, on the level of existence, I am engaged in a constant flight from the nothing that concerns my existence, namely death. The realisation of the fact of my finitude – that my existence is of a temporary rather than a permanent nature – gives rise to anxiety. Busying myself in lots of activities and pursuing distraction just as they do will hopefully make me as unconcerned about finitude as they seem to be. Being curious about gossip and newness suspends questions of meaning and an engagement with the (very old rather than new) fact that all of us are mortal.

Finitude is a problem for our existence because the fact that we will die casts doubt on the meaningfulness and relevance of my engagements in the here and now. If neither God nor some universal and eternal perspective stabilises the meaning of existence, nihilism becomes a special challenge. The source of these doubts is the fact of my mortality, but the circumstances of how death assails us create an even bigger emotional challenge. The fact that we do not know when or how we will die contributes to the anxiety we feel in relation to our finitude. Inauthenticity thus emerges as a response to certain features of our existence, namely its finitude and the threat of the nothing, and this already indicates that inauthenticity is not unequivocally a “bad” thing. As we will see presently, it is not a thing for which the designation “bad” makes much sense.

### *1.3 Inauthenticity as Non-Normative*

Heidegger states that the distinction between authenticity and inauthenticity is «not moralizing».<sup>15</sup> He does not tell us what we “should not do.” Similarly, he maintains that inauthenticity does not constitute a «negative evaluation».<sup>16</sup> Inauthenticity is not something “bad”, something we should avoid. These are the kinds of remarks many interpreters contest. Despite Heidegger’s insistence

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<sup>14</sup> BT, p. 173.

<sup>15</sup> BT, p. 167.

<sup>16</sup> BT, p. 175.

that inauthenticity is neither moralizing nor evaluative, many commentaries on *Being and Time* read the distinction as an evaluative one, and interpreters tend to claim that Heidegger considers authenticity to be morally superior to inauthenticity. If an argument is provided for this conviction at all, Heidegger's "tone" is usually invoked as evidence.<sup>17</sup> Yet the "tone" of an author does not suffice as a philosophical argument; "tone" is a vague category, open to interpretations and intuitions of various kinds. Furthermore, such readings are presumptuous, since they imply that either Heidegger is not sincere when claiming that the distinction between authenticity and inauthenticity is to be read in a neutral fashion, or that he fails to understand his own project. Instead, the current reading attempts to take Heidegger's work and words seriously.

One reason why the distinction should indeed not be considered moralizing is that it is not clear what such an evaluation would even entail, how it would be motivated, and how it would be justified. If inauthenticity is "bad" then we need to know what "bad" means, and we preferably need a moral theory or system to understand the claim. Phenomenology cannot rely on such theories and systems unless they emerge from the phenomenological enquiry; otherwise, we are confronted with an unmotivated presupposition.

Overall, it seems that inauthenticity and authenticity are more closely intertwined than most interpreters assume. Heidegger states: «Authentic Being-one's-Self does not rest upon an exceptional condition of the subject, a condition that has been detached from the "they" [*Man*]; it is rather an existentiell modification of the "they"». <sup>18</sup> Authenticity is not separated or detached from inauthenticity. A modification of a certain state implies that the modified state does not fully disappear, but continues to exist, albeit in a modified fashion.

In this article, inauthenticity is understood as the state of existence in which we always already and usually find ourselves. It is a state we take for granted, and phenomenology can serve to undermine this taken-for-grantedness and to put into question our common convictions. In the previous section, we saw that there are definite advantages to inauthenticity, or plausible reasons that motivate us to exist in that fashion. Once we have understood those reasons, it becomes more difficult or less enjoyable to remain in the state of inauthenticity; yet it is even more difficult to see what the alternative would be. Authenticity is an extremely enigmatic concept, and because of this it seems appropriate rather than a shortcoming that Heidegger says so little about it.

Furthermore, it seems that Heidegger uses the terminology of authenticity in

<sup>17</sup> E.g., ADORNO 2003, p. 427.

<sup>18</sup> BT, p. 130 (a very similar statement can be found on p. 267).



*Being and Time* in different ways. When Heidegger asks what a certain phenomenon “*eigentlich*” or authentically amounts to, he is asking for a more fundamental understanding of that phenomenon (and such a question is usually easier to tackle than the question of an authentic existence). But do attributes like “deeper” and “more fundamental” not point exactly to the superiority of authenticity? Admittedly, authenticity is “better” than inauthenticity if “better” means “more disclosive.” Yet this observation is a tautology when starting from authenticity as a methodological designation, that is, as a questioning of first appearances and a revealing of deeper dimensions of a given phenomenon. Moreover, the usual meaning of “better” is not “more disclosive”, but carries moral implications which we, following Heidegger, would like to avoid.

To put it quite bluntly: being inauthentic does not make somebody a morally reprehensible person. In fact it becomes quite difficult to see, on the basis of a phenomenological project, what morality even amounts to. Ethics is a different, more interesting yet more complex issue, and Heidegger’s considerations on the call of conscience are quite elucidatory in this respect. But rushed conclusions about a moral dimension to inauthenticity must in any case be avoided. It seems quite likely that Heidegger’s abandonment of the authenticity/inauthenticity distinction after *Being and Time* (even though he continues to use the adjective “*eigentlich*” in certain contexts) is a way of trying to avoid those misunderstandings that emerge especially from an individualising understanding of authenticity and inauthenticity. It would be more useful to consider them in the context of a world, that is, a cultural-historical world. The point is not to ask, “How can I break out of an inauthentic form of sociality?” (and it should not be assumed that it would make or prove me to be a better person if I did), but rather, “What does a certain understanding of sociality show about us, and especially about our contemporary world as the world in which we currently always already find ourselves?”

The third part of this essay will thus move the discussion to the level of world. However, both in order to understand world better and to examine the topic of social networks as an inauthentic form of sociality more thoroughly, our next topic will be sociality. So far, we have seen that the main characteristics of inauthenticity provided by Heidegger’s analysis apply to social networks, and we have seen what makes inauthenticity so attractive from an existential perspective. In order to see more fully how social networks indeed constitute an inauthentic form of sociality, it seems appropriate to now reverse direction and proceed “up”, from the deepest level of existential

finitude to the more mundane level of everyday engagements, and see more precisely how the attraction of inauthenticity plays out in terms of our social relations.

To this end, we need to expand the analysis and move beyond Heidegger's explicit reflections. This is not surprising, since Heidegger could not have considered virtual reality, and even sociality was not considered by him in much detail, as subsequent French phenomenologists like Jean-Paul Sartre and Emmanuel Levinas repeatedly pointed out. Furthermore, examining the relation between "normal" sociality and social networks requires attending to the role of the body, which does not receive much attention in *Being and Time*.<sup>19</sup> Yet it is on the basis of Heideggerian resources that we will expand his considerations.

## 2. Sociality

Ordinary social relations are relations from Dasein to Dasein. When Heidegger points out that our existence is always and essentially *Mitsein*, Being-with(-others), this is the case because our existence is defined by world (as existence is Being-in-the-world), and world is shared world in which the presence of others plays a crucial role. Furthermore, my existence is embodied, as is the Other's. Husserl's approach to the relation between perceiving the Other and perceiving their body is particularly helpful for reflections on the social body, which is our concern here. Admittedly, Husserl's text has evoked much criticism since his description focuses on establishing an analogy between my body and the Other's; but upon closer consideration, the situation is more complicated than Husserl's critics admit.<sup>20</sup> The role of the body for our social relations is not that we first perceive a body as if it were a mere physical object and then also establish that this body seems sufficiently similar to mine to start exploring a social relation. Rather, a social relation is a relation of interaction, and this interaction happens on an embodied level. Social interaction involves relating to each other on the bodily level, and it means communicating with each other, where ears play a paradigmatic role, as in the line from Hölderlin's

<sup>19</sup> Closer consideration would show that the body does emerge as a topic in *Being and Time*, though mostly indirectly by way of notions such as ready-to-hand (*zuhanden*) and present-at-hand (*vorhanden*), which cannot be understood without reference to our body as the way in which we are embedded in and relate to our closest environing world (*Umwelt*). Nonetheless, other thinkers such as Husserl and Levinas are more useful for our purposes in the next section since we are more concerned here with the social body or the body in relation to others than with the practical body.

<sup>20</sup> See STAEBLER 2008.

*“Friedensfeier”* that Heidegger places emphasis on: «Since we are a conversation and can hear from one another».<sup>21</sup> Communication is not limited to verbal language, and the conversation is not just from mouth to ear, but more generally from body to body.

### 2.1 Corporeality

Corporeality creates definite constraints, and it is to these constraints that social networks respond. Being a body means

- Being tied to the “here” and “now.” Social interaction thus normally requires two or more bodies together in a shared space, and that takes effort on various levels. Traditionally, there have been ways of evading this constraint, by sending letters or making phone calls. But these forms of communication are clearly derivative, building on and preparing for actual meetings in the flesh. Virtual social relations are different since they often begin and remain in virtual space, thus turning into an original rather than derivative form.<sup>22</sup>
- Being tied to this particular body. As most of us perceive our body as imperfect, our corporeality imposes constraints on social relations, not merely but perhaps predominantly where an erotic dimension is involved. While social networks tend to involve photographs, they do not have to; furthermore, I can select the photograph of myself and in this way exercise significant control over how I appear.
- Being exposed to tiredness, exhaustion, and other bodily states in which we seek the comfort of the home. Of course, one might immediately want to object that people engage in social networking not just from home but, especially due to the new generation of smartphones, tablets and phablets, from anywhere. However, the phenomenological notion of home is not limited to one’s house, but can be any location in which I make myself comfortable with myself and for myself. A genuine social relation with others, in contrast, requires me to enter a shared space.<sup>23</sup> It can also mean being hospitable and

21 «Seit ein Gespräch wir sind und hören können voneinander», HÖLDERLIN 1953, p. 430; HEIDEGGER 1996, p. 39.

22 One further indication that social networks are conceived as an original rather than derivative form of sociality is the extent to which virtual reality becomes the topic of actual conversations. Although I do not have any empirical data to confirm this estimate, it seems to me that at least half of the conversations amongst infant and primary school children nowadays focus on various forms of virtuality (mostly gaming, but the predominant gaming platforms have social network dimensions built into them, such as Bin Wheevils).

23 Phenomenologically speaking, a person completely immersed in her social media while travelling

opening my home to the Other, as I will discuss at the end of this essay.

Each of these restrictions of embodied existence could be explored further, and similar features could be established.

At this point we could imagine the proponent of social media asking: but is it not amazingly liberating to overcome those restrictions? Yes: it is all too liberating. Moving in virtual space means being, in a certain way, able to leave my body. Not physically, of course, but inasmuch as my focus, my possibilities and my experience are concerned. From the phenomenological, experience-based perspective, this would indeed constitute leaving my body. However, my body can announce itself by way of discomforts and needs, and thus interrupt my virtual experience; and we will see more closely in the next subsection how the escape provided by virtuality is indeed illusory.

It is understandable that leaving one's own body temporarily can be very attractive and appealing. Why would this be problematic? First of all, we need to remember again that designating a dimension as inauthentic does not mean designating it as bad. Yet it is somewhat problematic to become engrossed in this form of sociality, if only because it is so addictive. It is addictive partly because it is attractive (due to the advantages of inauthenticity as outlined above) and partly because of certain self-perpetuating features possessed by social networking. This addictive power can be elucidated with the help of an essay by David Foster Wallace entitled *E Unibus Pluram: Television and US Fiction*. In this essay, Wallace describes an addiction as "malign" if «(1) it causes real problems for the addict, and (2) it offers itself as a relief from the very problem it causes».<sup>24</sup> The second feature strikes me as more important and less vague than the first. Wallace explains how television is particularly attractive to those people who have difficulties relating to others, often because they do not feel very confident or very attractive to others. As a result of watching television, they feel even less attractive because those whom they watch on TV tend to be not just physically more attractive, but also smarter, wittier, cooler, more at ease, etc.

One might object that social networks differ from television in that respect, since they feature "normal" people rather than actors. That is true; but comparing happens nonetheless. Everybody tries to present themselves at their best in social networks. This is where the aforementioned feature of distantiality comes in: I try to not fall back behind others. Furthermore, as David Foster Wallace points out, television and similar virtual spaces are

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on public transport is still a person locked up in her home rather than sharing space in the social public.

24 WALLACE 1998 [1993], p. 38.

particularly attractive to those people who are self-conscious, shy, agoraphobic, or in other ways apprehensive about public places and social contexts. In these cases, the self-perpetuating character of staying in one's home and experiencing others in the virtual realm becomes particularly obvious. The more I see beautiful, confident, charming people on television, the more self-conscious I become about my own shortcomings. The more I relate to others through virtual social networks, the more difficult it will become to function in actual social spaces.<sup>25</sup> If my difficulties in this respect made virtuality attractive to me in the first place, then these difficulties can only be exacerbated by my immersion in social networking.

From the Heideggerian perspective, we need to be mindful of the possibility of entering into a purely ontical<sup>26</sup> – in this case, psychological – argument. We are not interested in identifying those who are, on account of their psyche or personality, more drawn to television or social networks than others.<sup>27</sup> Existential phenomenology seeks to identify determining structures of our existence, ontological structures that define our being, not ontical differences between personalities. Yet upon closer consideration, those general existential structures are indeed at stake here. Although some of us thrive in the social realm while others find social contexts difficult, being-with is in any case a defining feature of our existence. Being-with is the realm of being with other Dasein, that is, relating to those whose existence has the same general character as mine. Others are also directed at the world and experience this shared space as a realm that is intriguing and that offers multiple possibilities, and at the same time, as a realm that is fundamentally uncanny. I will never be able to fully make sense of world. This is at least partly due to the fact that others shape world and have always already shaped world when I come into it. My world and my existence are thus fundamentally influenced by others. Even on this basic level, there are already indications that others are the most interesting things in the world, much more enigmatic than objects that are ready-to-hand or present-at-hand.

Because of the special place they have in relation to my world (and for several other reasons, some of which we will see below), others affect me more than anything in the world. They affect me in various ways, making me happy or

25 WALLACE 1998 [1993], p. 38.

26 The ontical realm is the realm of beings in their diversity and concerns the perspective we usually take on them, whereas the ontological level examines their being or existence. Ontological enquiry is thus concerned with the being of beings. These distinctions need not be examined here in too much depth, and it should become obvious from the present paragraph how they are relevant to the argument.

27 For a discussion of the relation between these media, see BOLTER ET AL. 2000.

upset, excited or angry, intrigued or irritated. Sociality means being exposed to these diverse affects. The psychological differences mentioned above, that is, differences of being fearful of others or comfortable with them, concern the extent to which we are aware of the substantial impact others have on us. They also stem from our personal histories and the experiences we have had with others; yet these are, again, at an ontical level, which is of no particular interest here. Nonetheless, the observation about the enormous impact which others have on our lives and our affects holds true for existence in general.

It thus seems plausible to claim that social networks are so attractive because sociality is in general both utterly intriguing and precarious. Moreover, there is an urge to protect myself in relation to my sociality, to be able to withdraw into my home, which is a general existential desire even though it ontically manifests itself more strongly in some than in others. Social networks are so appealing because they fulfil *both* our desire for sociality (given that others are the most interesting thing in the world) *and* our desire to be protected in our home (given that others affect us most).

## 2.2 *The Illusion of Escape*

We have seen why social networks are so attractive and so addictive. The next question is, do they work? Do they indeed fulfil the double function of satisfying both the desires outlined above? The current essay argues that they do not – for at least three reasons.

a.) Social networks still leave us vulnerable, and the safety of the home is in many ways an illusion. There is an impression that social networks are more manageable and allow for an easier withdrawal from sociality. Nonetheless, if I am affected adversely, my distress is not virtual, but real. There are two ways in which people think they might be able to escape this vulnerability, but those also prove illusory:

b.) It might seem that social networks are less public than actual social spaces, but they are in certain ways even more public. What happens to me in virtual reality happens in front of witnesses, in front of third parties, in front of “friends” and “followers”; it is passed on to friends of friends and potentially to everybody. Others come to observe my social relations in virtual space. We have already seen above that sociality is quantified in virtual space, so that others can see how “likeable” I am, and this also adds to the addictive nature of such networks. It is not just my image in terms of numbers that is at stake here, although such numbers appear quite relevant in terms of comparability and distantiality. Still more potent, on the level of affects, are hurtful words and

compromising pictures. If these are “posted” in front of witnesses – and potentially in front of everybody – we start to see how it could come about that real suicides and real murders are sometimes the result of virtual disclosing.

c.) It might seem that there is an easy way of protecting myself and my home from virtual disclosure, namely by changing my identity. Some networks allow for this more easily than others, yet regardless of how much effort is entailed by taking on a modified identity in a network, interactive gaming platform, or chatroom, there will still always be enough of me involved to be affected. There is a difference between the experiencing me and the presented me, yet even though I may have created a substantial chasm between these two, the experiencing me is still the one to respond to the situation, and if it gets hurt, this affect is real.

These findings are confirmed by psychological and sociological research on the subject, including empirical studies. Sherry Turkle has observed and interviewed users of computers and social networks for over thirty years, and in her most recent study she concludes that social networks are a response to our human vulnerability and especially the fear of loneliness in combination with the fear of others and of intimacy: «We defend connectivity as a way to be close even as we effectively hide from each other».<sup>28</sup> She concludes that we lose crucial interpersonal skills and exacerbate the very problems that social networks were supposed to resolve.

What is it that gets lost of sociality in these virtual encounters? This question will be approached here by attending to a question that might well arise from the considerations presented in this article so far, a question that voices an objection: what about the obvious advantages of virtual space, especially for women? Is it not a relief and asset to be able to stay in the safety of the home rather than the precariousness of public spaces? The short answer is: yes, perhaps initially – but the transition to “real” social encounters will still have to be made, at least on certain occasions, and then it becomes all the more difficult.

It is important to note that such encounters, no matter how traumatising (in the wider, non-clinical sense) they may be, are in any case inevitable. On the ontical level, it is clear that staying entirely in one’s home and limiting social encounters to virtual space amounts to a pathology. On the ontological level, Emmanuel Levinas famously points out that the other is always already in me.<sup>29</sup> This trope is somewhat enigmatic, and there are undoubtedly quite a variety of possible interpretations, which cannot be considered here. But on the

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<sup>28</sup> TURKLE 2011, p. 281.

<sup>29</sup> E.g., LEVINAS 1981, p. 69.

most basic level, this statement can be read as a reminder that others have always already impacted me and shaped my life, and will continue to do so.

Not only is world shared with others and shaped by others, but others are crucial because they have the same world-relation as myself: existence, or standing out into world. Since it is in any case impossible to escape from others or to avoid them, it seems advisable to confront them, face-to-face, for better or worse, and to engage with them. The more comfortable we become in the alleged safety of virtual space – which is, as we have seen, only the illusion of safety – the more difficult it becomes to adjust to others in the flesh. Social networks place me at the centre of my universe and allow for a high level of fantasy in my social relations. On the basis of how others present themselves, I can fantasize about how I would be with them, and my presentation of myself, or my “profile”, is based on how I would like to see myself and how I would like others to see me. It is obvious that such self-controlled social fantasy space gives little room for radical difference or for the Other to present themselves in a truly other, surprising, unforeseeable fashion. Yet it is only by confronting the Other that the trauma of the encounter with the Other can potentially turn into wonder at the Other. Wonder can inspire philosophy, and in a different historical world (namely, the Ancient Greek world), it has. Wonder can also open up world to me as a dimension that exceeds the limits of virtual space as an illusory retreat.

### 3. World

In order to see the potential of inauthenticity as a non-normative concept more fully, we need to move beyond the more “individualistic” reading of *Being and Time*, which invites misunderstandings like those discussed in previous sections, towards a reading that identifies inauthenticity as a social phenomenon. More precisely, the suggestion put forth here is to read specific manifestations of inauthenticity as symptomatic of a certain historical world.

The question would then no longer be, “Should I or should I not subscribe to social networks?” but rather, “What does it reveal about our contemporary world that social networks have become such a pervasive form of sociality?” We have already seen that the concept of sociality behind such manifestations involves a high level of control and fantasy on my part. In terms of the “vulgar” or mundane understanding of our historical world, this is part of what (usually older) people complain about when they describe current society as “individualistic”. But how can we approach the state of our current historical



world in a more philosophical fashion? What philosophical diagnosis can be provided that would explain and stand behind the mundane characterisation of society as individualistic?

Although it would be a very interesting task to respond to these questions with the help of Heidegger's philosophy, there is too much provisional work necessary to provide the grounds for such an exploration.<sup>30</sup> Instead, I draw upon two phenomenologists who allow for a more straightforward phenomenology of the historical world, namely Hegel and Husserl. The crucial concept that Hegel and Husserl allow us to introduce and explore is that of a crisis of the historical world. Inauthentic forms of existence, so we may suspect, would become manifest in a sense of crisis.

### 3.1 Crisis

How can crisis be made plausible as a philosophical concept, that is, as a "concept" in the genuine sense (where concept or *Begriff*, for Hegel, implies a means that is crucial to grasping the nature of world Spirit at a historical moment), such that it contains enough "rigour" (*Strenge*, as requested by Husserl for any theory that qualifies as philosophy) for a philosophical analysis? Without entering into a full philosophical discussion of the complex term "crisis", let me simply indicate how, for Hegel and Husserl, a crisis of the historical world becomes noticeable. For Hegel, a crisis of an historical world occurs when there is a clash between «inner striving and outer reality».<sup>31</sup> Within the Hegelian framework, such a clash between thought and reality is productive, since it brings about a dialectical development in which reality is transformed in such a way as to eventually resolve the clash. The initial driving power, according to Hegel, is the idea of freedom, which becomes prominent in philosophy and leads to a corresponding transformation of reality.

Probably the most problematic result of Hegelian philosophy is the idea that this dialectical development ultimately leads to a state in which crisis is overcome such that thought (or in Hegel's terms, Spirit) and reality become reconciled. For Husserl, in contrast, there is no philosophical reason or necessity as to why history would be a development of progress. The crisis that he describes as a crisis of the European sciences is a crisis of European humanity (as the title of his original Vienna lecture has it) and is due to the

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30 Heidegger's works on enframing (*Gestell*) and technology would be crucial here, as would his considerations on the history of Being as they are prepared for in the relevant sections on world-history in *Being and Time*. Yet this material is itself too complex and interwoven with a number of even more difficult concepts to be useful here.

31 HEGEL 1974, p. 71.

enormous role which the sciences play for our understanding of world; yet it is a crisis which has its beginnings in Ancient Greece.<sup>32</sup> It is a crisis that emerges from a one-sided interpretation of the world, which has its origins in the Greek focus on unified, single, objective ideas at the expense of subjective, plural appearances. The Greeks also developed the basic mathematical frameworks that allowed for the mathematization of nature, which Husserl identifies in the modern era and links to the name of Galileo Galilei, though the latter features only as an exemplar of a general trend.

These Husserlian considerations, presented here only in the most truncated form, are relevant for our purposes because of the character of crisis as identified by Husserl. The crisis emerges because of one-sided explanations that prioritise quantification and objectivity as delivered by mathematics. A similar emphasis on objectivity and precision plays out in social networks. Firstly, there is the quantification of social relations that comes with measuring friends, clicks, and likes, as explained above. In addition, there is a sense in which the virtual world is, in general, neatly structured and organised in terms that create an impression of accessibility, equality and fairness, due to the fact that the rules are clear and apply to everybody. For this reason, social networks appear non-threatening; but as we have seen above, the affects they evoke are entirely real and are by no means limited to the positive. Furthermore, clear rules do not exclude possibilities of violation, subversive action, mobbing, exposure, or identity theft – and the problem is exacerbated because all of these happen in front of an audience, as outlined above.

At its basis, the virtual world is built on numbers, or rather, digits. We do not need to understand how computers work to take full advantage of social networks and other services. Yet the point remains that just as the natural sciences, due to their basic reliance on mathematics, only allow for a certain presentation and interpretation of world, so the virtual world in all its colourfulness nonetheless inherits certain limitations from the way it functions at its basis, including a certain “flatness” despite all the pretence of three dimensionality. Complex discussions about artificial intelligence and emotions as well as the pop versions of such debates in science fiction films (such as *Blade Runner*) testify to this. Its basic neutrality, accessibility, objectivity and rule-organisation make the virtual world utterly attractive and create an illusion of manageability, equality and control. Yet even the term “networking” points to the significant impact of connections and power.

Returning to the Hegelian definition of crisis, we can see how the attractive

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32 HUSSERL 1970. The original Vienna lecture on which the Crisis study is based comes as a supplementary text in the volume and bears the title *Philosophy and the Crisis of European Humanity*.

and addictive power of the virtual world in general (and of social networks in particular) may create a pull that leads not into a dialectical development of transforming reality so as to be better adjusted to thought, but creates a dimension of evasion that allows us to turn away from reality. The virtual world appears much more organised, predictable and readable than the real world, and it is sufficiently deep and complex, especially given its social dimension, to pull us away from reality. If the Hegelian concept of crisis is applied, yet thought is concerned not with philosophy but with a virtual replacement for reality, we might be led into a development not of progress, but standstill, or perhaps even to a decline, as far as the real world is concerned. Although there continues to be a mismatch, this clash will not be immediately noticeable if the virtual world is sufficiently engaging. Yet in the longer run, it will become noticeable if crucial aspects of our existence remain eclipsed or neglected, such as aesthetic, emotional, social and historical dimensions. This leads us back to the question of how a phenomenology of the historical world is possible.

### *3.2 Our Historical World*

The current article argues that phenomenology as pursued by Husserl, Heidegger, Derrida and others indeed accomplishes an account of the historical world. To see more closely how a phenomenology of the historical world can be possible, we need to follow Husserl's train of thought a bit further to see how the claim about neglected dimensions of existence relates to our topic of social networks. Husserl admits that the sciences' history of success makes it difficult to see the significance of marginalised dimensions beyond a vague sense of there being something missing. In order to search for the forgotten dimension, he proposes considering Helmholtz's image of two-dimensional creatures which are unaware of the existence of a third dimension.<sup>33</sup> Husserl's idea is that the world explanation provided by the natural sciences has an internal consistency that creates the impression of a complete plane in which to move – yet something, a wholly other dimension, is missing. According to Husserl, that is the dimension of subjectivity, which creates and gives meaning to what is happening in the plane.

Transposed to our topic, the image of a missing dimension appears useful because social networks indeed create an impression of a complete world of sociality. Yet upon closer inspection, depth is missing: namely, the depth of encounters with others in the flesh. This depth is created by the impact of the

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<sup>33</sup> HUSSERL 1970, p. 118 ff.

Other on my affective life, for better or worse, and the potential of the Other to deeply and truly surprise me. The “crisis” this lack brings about is a crisis of continuing loneliness, despite all the “social” involvement. This is the case also because the plane of sociality that social networks open up remains a self-centred world, a world that gives the impression of an opening to the Other and yet remains ultimately my plane that I organise around me, surveying and exploring it as I see fit. In the language of literary theory, the characters of this plane are all “flat” characters, and their shortcomings in comparison to me as the only “round” character do not go unnoticed.

However, is it even permissible to apply Husserl’s thoughts to our current historical world? The suggestion that the crisis as identified by Husserl is not just a crisis that has been in the making since the emergence of science with the Ancient Greeks (as explained above), but also continues to be our contemporary crisis stands at odds with at least one crucial dimension of the crisis as identified by Husserl: the medical idea of crisis as a turning point, that is, a critical state that will lead to either recovery or deterioration, and potentially even to death. In other words, if the concept of crisis were such that there is always a crisis of sorts – albeit one that manifests itself differently throughout history and is evoked by different paradigms – is the name “crisis” still justified?

To resolve this difficulty, it may prove helpful to invoke a Hegelian concept of crisis and history (even if not exactly Hegel’s). Perhaps we are dealing with a dialectical development in the broadest sense; that is, not in the sense of any (continuous) progress, but in the sense of the emergence of a new historical world after each crisis. The new world (in the phenomenological sense of a meaningful context) would be a transformation of the previous in an attempt to overcome certain problems, but would still remain linked to the previous shape of world. The new historical world could be called a new epoch, bearing in mind that the concept of *epoché*, which proves so crucial for Husserl’s philosophy, includes a suspension of an old belief system that gives rise to new paradigms. This new historical world with its transformed paradigm does not emerge out of nowhere, but constitutes precisely a continuation of the previous one, modified in accordance with the crisis. In our case, this might be a continuation of the paradigm of mathematization, but no longer with a major emphasis on the natural sciences, which have proven sufficiently incomprehensible that the everyday person can deal merely with their products and can only take these in a predominantly consumerist fashion. Although new paradigms usually become more visible in retrospect, the current one seems definitely to involve a powerful combination and close

linkage of economics and politics. The worship of numbers has taken an extreme shape in which money, bonds and shares have become increasingly detached from what they represent. This detachment has made it possible to make money from money in such a fashion that simply contemplating this process creates a sense of intellectual vertigo. Yet for some reason, we remain convinced that there would be a change to the worse (in terms of our self-gratification) if such boundless capitalism were to be prohibited or significantly restricted. Given the close alliance, since Ancient times, between politics and rhetoric, it is of little surprise that there is such reluctance to question the current economic paradigm.<sup>34</sup>

The reader might at this point be shaking his or her head in disbelief, given that social networks and media are often perceived as a way of overcoming political propaganda and organising political resistance.<sup>35</sup> Yet there seems to be no clear reason why these ends could not be achieved through a different kind of electronic publication, such as an ordinary website. In the case of an ordinary webpage, the publicness is well known and can be considered in designing it.<sup>36</sup> In contrast, the deceptive character of the publicness involved in social networks, along with their potential for forging identities, for virtual mobbing, the misplaced focus on quantification and their overall addictive nature are the main reasons for focussing on them in this article.

Secondly, in line with the emphasis on historical worlds as explored here, it might be worthwhile remembering the origins of political engagement in actual social discussions, for which the Greek marketplace (*agora*) functioned as more than a metaphor. The underlying political issues are too complex for the current article. Among many other problems, we might have adopted an unacknowledged Hegelian assumption of exactly the kind which nobody would openly want to accept nowadays, namely, the assumption that there is only one *telos* to world history. This time, however, the realisation of world Spirit would presumably have happened in the United States. Those who have not reached this *telos* are, according to this conception, simply not there *yet* – that is, they are stuck at an earlier level of Spirit and thus in need of spiritual rescue.<sup>37</sup> Such rescue always happens in the name of freedom, a concept

34 Financier Nicolas Berggruen states in an interview: “The financial industry produces financial weapons of mass destruction” (*Worth*. Issue October/November 2012).

35 For an example of this position, see MASON 2012.

36 Another question worth exploring, which has to be left open here, concerns the nature of a work (*Werk*), in which Heidegger locates the nature of art. A work would be that which can stand in itself, or be without its father or creator. A literary text on the Internet displayed as a work – that is, in itself – can be such a thing. Yet there are certain things, be they statements, proclamations, or styles, which simply should not be left to stand in themselves.

37 The question as to whether there are any alternatives to such a mono-teleology is too complex for

impossible to reject yet so extremely difficult to understand. Jean-Luc Nancy has suggested that all concepts of freedom in the political realm are based on a much deeper concept of freedom, which is synonymous with existence or at least emerges naturally from it. Such a concept of freedom calls for an investigation of who we are on the most basic level, in our existence as a social animal or as creatures for whom being with others is a crucial dimension of existence.

Furthermore, we are coming to learn that virtual space is the realm of complete transparency. This might not be actually the case, but it is the case in principle. The American NSA and British SIS, most likely a number of other national secret services, and numerous hackers around the world can in principle have access to everything we do and say online. We have recently learned that the NSA has used Facebook to obtain information about people. Most likely, the majority of us are not actually interesting enough for anybody to pay attention; yet this does not change the fact that there is in principle complete transparency in virtual space.<sup>38</sup>

Yet we are also creatures who request and give hospitality to one another, and as Jacques Derrida rightly points out, there cannot be hospitality if there is complete transparency and thus no possibility of forming and offering a home.<sup>39</sup> It is certainly an interesting and ironic twist of fate that the most pervasive social network, Facebook, is apparently now at risk of becoming less popular due to the discomfort brought about by the fact that "one"'s parents are also on Facebook (since the older generation proves less old-fashioned than expected and/or desired, and is for valid reasons open to the addictive powers fuelled by the illusion of overcoming the limitations of corporeality). The significance of the distinction between public and private is thus proven yet again. If this distinction is undermined, we lose much of what we can be to each other.

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the current article. Husserl's idea of a teleology in history does not imply the idea of just one *telos*, but of various *teloi* that can be modified over time. In that sense, a historical epoch might also be characterised by its defining *telos*, or set thereof. DERRIDA 2005 calls for a more radical reconceptualization, asking us to think beyond what he calls «teleologism». On the level of more practical political considerations, BERGGRUEN & GARDELS 2013 suggest that there could be an Eastern alternative to the Western idea of competing political systems in which the point is to convert the other. This alternative would be a balance where opposed systems hold each other in place, so to speak (and might even help each other to self-critique).

38 It is worth noting, though it is probably going to remain inconsequential, that the European Court of Justice has in April 2014 ruled the universal retention of data illegal.

39 DERRIDA 2000.

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